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BRIEF MENTION

The American Language: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States. By H. L. Mencken (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1919). In the days of Noah Webster, the prophecy of "a future separation of the American tongue from the English" was protected against serious refutation primarily by its patriotic symbolism, and surely also because of an undeveloped state of linguistic science. This new language Webster declared to be "necessary and inevitable." Mr. Mencken quotes the argument: "Numerous local causes, such as a new country, new associations of people, new combinations of ideas in arts and sciences, and some intercourse with tribes wholly unknown in Europe, will introduce new words into the American tongue. These causes will produce, in a course of time, a language in North America as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish and Swedish are from the German, or from one another." The inequality of terms, the confusion of values, apparent even to the elementary observer, is sufficient to show that Webster in this comparison did not reason soundly, but allowed his imagination to break thru its normal restraints to riot in irresponsible fancy. As for the vision as a whole, it has never been and never can be regarded as anything more serious and valuable than a capricious play of the mind of the patriotic grammarian and lexicographer. But it must in haste be added that there was also much of incontrovertible truth—of common-place truth—in the terms of the vision. A "new country" connoted the independent development of a 'new world,' with implications of vastly important linguistic influence. 'Americanisms' would of course be inevitable; and even in his calmest mood Webster might have predicted a long enduring scholastic and popular interest in these aspects of the language. The technical linguist, he might have said, will not be easily misled in the evaluation of these national peculiarities; but the untrained observer, who is easily led *nodum in scirpo quaerere*, will probably find this subject especially available for that variety of popular discussion which is marked by ostentation of knowledge and pride of wit in controversy.

The power to assimilate new elements and to adapt itself to new conditions belongs to a strong and well organized language; and no language has surpassed English in a triumphant maintenance of this power under severest tests. Even an elementary knowledge of the history of the language is sufficient to fortify the mind against the acceptance of any theory that leans to the possibility of a future breaking up of so powerful, resourceful, and organically complete a unity. Moreover the test to which the essential oneness of the language has been put under American conditions has not, in strictness, been a severe test. In both England and America the popular mind has never been in doubt about the fact that English

is the language of America as truly as it is that of England; and it is well aware that in passing from one country to the other differences are encountered in the naming of some objects, in colloquialisms, in several preferred idioms, and in the intonation of the voice. And the popular mind could not be persuaded that these differences are of a character that might lead to a division of English into two languages. All average experience favors the right judgment in this matter. The schools of both countries teach correct English, with at most an incidental reference to slight variations in national usage,—but for the most part with no reference whatever to these variations,—and the basis of this instruction is a common literature. In England, it may be added, there is an influence of the historic dialects and in America the influence of the languages of immigrants to be counteracted in the schools, but these conditions serve merely to give clearer definition to the function of the schools. Popular education, which has notable modern aspects, is moreover but one of the agencies in the complex of forces by which the character of the language is conserved and strengthened,—forces that may be grouped as being social, literary, scientific, commercial, and national.

The title of Mr. Mencken's book would indicate a revamping of Webster's prophetic theory, but he is too alert to be so easily ensnared and refers the reader to his sub-title. He justifies his undertaking by declaring that he is aiming to supply a contribution to a sorely needed account of what, in all its details, is characteristic of English in America. He is disturbed by the inadequacy of the records of 'Americanisms' and the lack of trustworthy treatises on the national 'idiom' in the light of linguistic science. "On the large and important subject of American pronunciation, for example," he declares, "I could find nothing save a few casual essays. On American spelling, with its wide and constantly visible divergencies from English usage, there was little more. On American grammar there was nothing whatever. Worse, an important part of the poor literature that I unearthed was devoted to absurd efforts to prove that no such thing as an American variety of English existed." But since these statements may by implication promise too much, the book is defended on a modified basis: "Perhaps one dialect, in the long run, will defeat and absorb the other; in that case, something may be accomplished by examining the differences which exist today. In some ways, as in intonation, English usage is plainly better than American. In others, as in spelling, American usage is as plainly better than English. But in order to develop usages that the peoples of both nations will accept it is obviously necessary to study the differences now visible. This study thus shows a certain utility;" but a culminating purpose is served by the 'study': "its chief excuse is its human interest, for it prods deeply into national idiosyncrasies and ways of mind, and that sort of prodding is always entertaining."

In the expressions just now cited, Mr. Mencken's attitude to the subject of his book is made clear enough. It is not the attitude of the accurate and philosophic scholar, but that of the facile journalist, well endowed with a sense for the perception of the humorous and satiric sides of the subject and for the recognition of material rich in popular elements for making copy. But in making an excursion into this alluring field, Mr. Mencken has not assumed his task to be an easy one, as is attested by the bibliography of his sources, which consists of some three hundred titles, and by the appended "List of Words and Phrases" treated in the book, an index-list occupying eighteen pages closely printed in three columns to the page. His book is a stately volume of 374 royal octavo pages, with the subject-matter in nine comprehensive chapters, each of which is arranged in a number of logically distinguished sections. Whatever, therefore, of praise has been deserved by enthusiastic industry and constructive skill in composing this book must be freely granted, but Mr. Mencken must in turn be content with the judgment that finds but a modicum of linguistic value in it. The science of language requires a sustained elevation in accuracy of fact and trained perceptions in the discussion of principles. In this department of knowledge, as in all others, there is for the untrained aspirant an easy descent to the bottom of the unauthentic: *si paulum summo decessit, vergit ad imum*.

When Mr. Mencken writes "The exigencies of my vocation make me almost completely bilingual; I can write English, as in this clause, quite as readily as American, as in this here one," it might be thought that he is challenging the reader to prove that he is not jesting; but the reader has only to turn to the chapter on "The Common Speech" to discover that the so-called American clause gives the key-note to the most serious argument of the book. In respect of linguistic doctrine this chapter puts the author in the strongest light. The first section is a vaudeville gibe at grammar as a science, at grammarians as dolts, and at 'school-marms' teaching grammar as a pitifully incompetent class. Unfortunately it is true that some compilers of school-grammars and many teachers using these books hardly surpass Mr. Mencken in failure to understand the profound import of grammar as a codification of laws of the mind. "Spoken American As It is" is the subject of the next section. What is considered to be the true form of American English is the "highly viril and defiant dialect . . . of the mill-hand . . . with his five years of common schooling behind him, . . . and not the fossilized English of the school-marm and her books." This brings the author to a point where material abounds for 'copy' to sustain the implications of his American clause already cited. Much of the material consists of reports of school-children's errors in language,—errors that are reviewed in the following sections of this long chapter under the titles: The Verb; The Pronoun; The Adverb; The Noun and Ad-

jective; The Double Negative; and Pronunciation. In this classification Mr. Mencken must of course accept the "imbecile classifications" of grammar, that "most funereal of the sciences." But he is consistently inconsistent, for he can denounce grammar and heap reproach upon the grammarian, and then turn to Bradley, Lounsbury, Sayce, and Sweet and compile, in technical terms, pages from their books. Indeed he here shows himself extraordinarily apt in acquiring an elementary comprehension and facility in application of the principles of analogy, form-association, phonetic change, and comprehensive tendencies in linguistic tradition, and thereby puts a stress on his deficiency in the training that would have fitted him to keep his book in consistent conformity with sound scholarship and authentic reasoning.

In his report of the "American vulgate," Mr. Mencken keeps his promise in offering abundant entertainment, which, in no small measure, is achieved by a sustained air of profound generalization from errors of a class that the average reader will consider either too infrequent or of too little influence to call for the most serious attention. Mr. Mencken's observations and discussion should, however, also make clearer the pedagogic helpfulness of carefully prepared lists of the errors in language brought to the schools by the children of America. The teachers in the schools of England would be assisted in a corresponding way. These national lists would have many points of agreement, which taken together with the points of divergence would add to the proof of the essential and enduring unity of the English language.

In the bibliography, already mentioned, Mr. Mencken himself has a credit of a good dozen of titles. From these preliminary studies (one published in *The Smart Set*, the others in newspapers) a popular, racy, journalistic style has been imported into the book, which has, on the other hand, gained from the same source a fulness and variety of details,—the fruit of occupation with the subject at intervals during some nine years. The book therefore conveys a well-marked type of entertainment in both style and subject-matter; and let it be frankly acknowledged that the average reader will here find abundant instruction that is not elsewhere made easily accessible in so comprehensive a manner. In accepting both entertainment and instruction, the expert reader will not, of course, dethrone his scientific judgment.

The titles of Mr. Mencken's chapters shall be cited, altho these are so comprehensive in form as to make necessary the aid of the section-titles in a satisfactory report of what the book contains: I, By Way of Introduction; II, The Beginnings of American; III, The Period of Growth; IV, American and English Today; V, Tendencies in American; VI, The Common Speech; VII, Differences in Spelling; VIII, Proper Names in American; IX, Miscellanea (here the section-titles are: Proverb and Platitude; American Slang; The Future of the Language). In the penultimate chapter

(the section-titles are: Surnames; Given Names; Geographical Names; Street Names) Mr. Mencken has with admirable industry and with alertness in personal observation brought together in an entertaining and instructive manner material that no intelligent reader will fail to value as a factor in the complex problem of the interior history of the nation. Incidentally it may be observed that the clever author has missed the point of the Darby and Enroughty event (p. 283); this should here be passed by, if the correction did not also reach to a misapplication of analogy in the context. The final 'miscellanea' leave the reader's mind freshly stirred to speculate on the probabilities favorable to an increasing supremacy of English among the most highly developed languages of the world.

J. W. B.

Formative Types in English Poetry. By George Herbert Palmer (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918). The "eager auditors" which, according to the author's preface, this book has found when it was presented in the form of lectures at various colleges must have been stimulated largely by Professor Palmer's delightful manner of reading from the works of the poets upon whom he offers his comments. That personal appeal has disappeared from the printed page. Leaving aside Milton because he was "too big" for him, and Donne because he despaired of making him "intelligible within any brief compass," he considers seven poets whose attitude towards life and towards their art made their work "formative," so that they influenced the subsequent development of poetry. These men are: Chaucer, who, according to Professor Palmer, "looks out upon life, enjoys it, and attempts to reproduce it for our pleasure" in an objective and realistic way; Spenser, who withdraws "as far as possible from subjection to fact" and finds "in verse a veritable refuge from reality"; Herbert, who endeavors to get the mood of his unique soul "transferred with utmost precision to other minds"; Pope, who contributes a "sober, rational, and corrective influence" in opposition to the earlier "turbulent egotism" and deals "with typical character, expressive of some universal principle"; Wordsworth, who "turned away from the generalities of Classicism, prizing the specific fact, the specific experience, the specific person," but who incompletely carried out this function of the Romanticist; Tennyson, who reconstituted the technique of poetry and applied himself to the delineation of individual moods; and Browning, who makes us "feel the complex and unstable unity of an individual person." Browning is thus exalted to the position of culmination towards which poetry had long been gradually rising. Such plotting of stages of advance betokens the point of view of a realistic individualist; hence the sympathy with Pope despite the extraordinary dictum that "about in proportion as English poetry becomes clear and simple it becomes doubtfully sincere"; hence the entire lack

of comprehension of the genius of Chaucer of whom it is said that "he never dissected motives, studied aspirations, laid bare the waywardness and contradictions which lurk in the interior of each of us." The popularization of poetry is a worthy occupation; but need it be done in the fashion of a primer? And need its presentation of old well-worn truths be marred by misunderstandings and by more minor inaccuracies than there is space to set down here?

S. C. C.

Miss Lily B. Campbell has written a very entertaining *History of Costuming on the English Stage between 1660 and 1823*, which appears as No. 2 of the University of Wisconsin Studies in Language and Literature. It is a study parallel to her "Rise of a Theory of Stage Presentation in England during the Eighteenth Century" (*PMLA*. xxx, 2), and it shows the same influences at work. Through the first half of this period there was an unthinking obedience to tradition. The costumes were contemporaneous with the dramatist, not with his historic characters, and no regard was paid to the peculiarities of race or nation. Hamlet's "forest of feathers," which actors "of heroism and dignity" were supposed to wear, persisted till the time of Garrick, and black velvet was the only wear for empresses and queens. At the end of the first quarter of the eighteenth century, with the advent of Aaron Hill and Macklin, the first influences of romanticism began to make themselves felt in costuming just as they did in other departments of art and literature, with the result that propriety as well as probability in costume and beauty in line and color were insisted upon. With the development of antiquarian research and a more accurate knowledge of the dress of foreign peoples and of other times there came a corresponding endeavor to bring stage-costuming more into harmony with the scene presented on the boards. It was slow work, however, as Miss Campbell's quotations from contemporary documents convincing and often amusingly show. As late as 1789 Mrs. Crouch appeared in "a fancy hat, powdered hair, rouge, point lace, and fine linen" as one of the witches in *Macbeth*, and though the ghost in *Hamlet* wore armor, Hamlet himself was in a modern suit. It was not till 1823, when Charles Kemble in much trepidation as to the result presented *King John* in the dress of the period, that realism in stage-costume according to historically accurate designs triumphantly established itself. So this study shows once more that when theatrical managements try to lead and educate the public, they generally can do so. It might have been better if Miss Campbell had shown the parallel development of stage-setting through this period, for the relation of costume and scenery must have been very close. But perhaps that is being reserved for a third paper.

J. W. T.